Callie Friedman

Ms. Kraft

AML 2410, Section 8974

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“Death of a Salesman”

In “Death of a Salesman” by Arthur Miller, Willy Loman represents a man obsessed with the “American Dream.” While he possesses many other issues, most of these issues are centered on his idea of what he thinks his life should be like. More over, Willy struggles with his relationship with his sons and how his family is perceived throughout the community. In Willy’s eyes, being “well liked” is the most important quality one can possess. With this, Willy believes, success will come overnight. While Willy preaches this to his sons throughout their entire upbringing, Willy eventually realizes that his beliefs and values may not always lead to a pathway of success. It is too late and Willy is already too far gone as a character when he begins to understand his parental mistakes. Miller brings up major themes through the character of Willy Loman that ultimately lead to his death. Most prominently, the ideas of fantasy versus reality and failure versus success are discussed throughout the play.

From the very beginning of “Death of a Salesman” up until the very end it is clear to the reader that Willy Loman places himself in fantasy situations. It is as if he refuses to accept the pain of reality. His flash backs almost always portray the times in his life when he felt there was some sort of opportunity or gain. When Willy is flashing back to his son Biff in high school, the images that are described are always those of his great looks and stellar football talents. This was a time in Willy’s life that he felt his son was going to be a great success. In addition, Willy also has flashbacks with The Woman. Whenever he was with the woman he felt empowered and good about himself. She lifted his spirits and made him feel as if he was worth something. In his first flashback with her, Willy cannot believe that The Woman “picked him.” She says, “You didn’t make me Willy. I picked you… I did. I’ve been sitting at that desk watching all the salesmen go by, day in, day out. But you’ve got such a sense of humor, and we do have such a good time together, don’t we?” Willy also struggles with the difference between fantasy and reality when he refers to how much commission he made in one week. He busts through the door all excited about making twelve hundred gross from his trip, when in reality he only made two hundred gross in total. Near the end of the play, Willy has a huge conflict in his mind regarding Biff and his situation with Oliver. Despite the fact that Biff has told him numerous times that he does not have another appointment with Oliver, Willy cannot get it through his mind that the meeting did not work out. In Willy’s fantasy world, Biff’s meeting went glowingly and he will be starting a successful business in no time. However, the reality of the situation is that Biff is exactly where he started, which Willy refuses to accept.

Willy analyzes his life through his personal ideas successful. Most of the time these ideas are unrealistic. As teenagers, Willy treated his sons as complete opposites based on their talents and skills. Willy constantly praised Biff for his “well liked” personality and football skills while Happy was never given the same amount of attention. Because Biff was going to play college football and was respected by his peers, nothing else mattered to Willy. Biff fit the “American Dream” stereotype that was always so important to Willy. In fact, Willy encouraged Biff to cheat on his math tests because his grades were not a relevant factor in achieving success. “There’s nothing the matter with him! You want him to be a worm like Bernard? He’s got spirit, personality.” What is frustrating as a reader is that Willy holds unattainable standards for himself. Because he has such specific ideas of what success is, he does not leave any room to be happy. If he could just accept his life the way it is, he would not make himself crazy thinking about all the ways he has “failed.”

From the beginning of the play it is obvious that Willy’s death is inevitable. He remains consistently inconsistent with his emotions and ways about life. His struggles with fantasy and reality eventually take over while causing him more pain than he had to begin with. Most importantly, his unnecessarily harsh views on what it means to be successful bring him down more than anything.